Dispelling Myths Regarding L2 Acquisition in Childhood And Adult

Mobina Bahrami Rad
B.A. in TEFL, Farhangian University

Abstract

This paper addresses and debunks several prevalent myths related to language acquisition in both childhood and adulthood. It challenges misconceptions such as non-native English-speaking parents needing to speak English at home, the ease of second language acquisition in early childhood, and the notion that adults cannot effectively learn languages. Through a thorough review of empirical studies, including those by McCabe et al.[1], Leikin[2], Gold et al.[3], and Kuhl[4], the paper elucidates the complexities of language learning, emphasizing that children benefit most from hearing fluent language from parents, and that adults, while lacking a "critical period," can leverage cognitive advantages and effective strategies for language acquisition. The findings highlight the multifaceted benefits of multilingualism, including cognitive, social, and economic advantages, and propose that motivation, self-regulation, and tailored learning strategies are crucial at any age.

Keywords: “myth” “L2 acquisition” “adult” “childhood”.

Introduction

The acquisition of a second language (L2) has long been a subject of interest and debate among linguists, educators, and psychologists. A prevalent belief is that children are inherently more adept at learning new languages compared to adults, a notion often supported by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). This hypothesis posits that there is a biologically determined period during which language acquisition occurs most easily and beyond which it becomes significantly more challenging [5]. However, recent research challenges this simplistic view and suggests that the ability to learn an L2 is influenced by a myriad of factors beyond age, including motivation, exposure, and cognitive strategies [6].

One of the most pervasive myths is that adults are at a disadvantage in acquiring a second language compared to children. This belief stems from the observation that children often achieve native-like pronunciation and fluency more readily than adults. However, studies have shown that adults can also attain high levels of proficiency, especially when they are highly motivated and immersed in a supportive environment [7]. For instance, research by Ioup, Boustagui, Tigi, and Moselle (1994) [8] demonstrated that adults could achieve native-like proficiency in Arabic through motivation and naturalistic exposure, challenging the notion that age is the sole determinant of language learning success.

Moreover, the misconception that children learn languages effortlessly overlooks the structured and supportive environments often provided to them, which are crucial for language development. In contrast, adults frequently learn languages in more formal settings, which may not always facilitate natural language use [6]. Additionally, adults possess cognitive advantages such as metalinguistic awareness and problem-solving skills, which can aid in language learning [9].

Research indicates that factors such as motivation, attitude, and learning strategies play a significant role in L2 acquisition across all ages. Ehrman and Oxford (1995) [10] highlighted the importance of cognitive aptitude and self-efficacy in adult language learners, suggesting that these factors are more critical than age itself. Similarly, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) [11] found that willingness to communicate and positive attitudes towards the target culture significantly impact L2 achievement.

Furthermore, the role of the learning environment cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that both children and adults benefit from rich linguistic environments that provide ample opportunities for interaction and practice [12]. This is particularly evident in immersive settings where learners are exposed to the language in meaningful contexts.

Research Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative analysis method intending to provide an overview of dispelling myths regarding L2 acquisition in childhood and adult. The approach used is library research with data sources from articles in other journals similar to this research.

Results & Discussion

Myth 1: Non-Native English Speaking Parents Should Speak English in the Home

In the U.S. there seems to be a common belief that parents should stop talking to their infants in their native language in order to prepare them for English interactions. When parents with limited English proficiency follow this frequent advice, they lose opportunities to support their children's language development as the parent has a limited vocabulary in English. In addition to missing the opportunity to learn the home language, children are not learning to use language from a fluent adult, and therefore, they do not experience great gains in English. When parents do not use the language in which they are most proficient, in some cases language development in general is put at risk [1]. Children develop language optimally when parents talk to them in a language in which the parents are proficient and fluent [1]. Through language, parents socialize children and share cultural beliefs and values. By decreasing the use of the home language, parents might be sacrificing the sharing of their culture and traditions with their children. By prioritizing the use of the home language in early childhood, parents and professionals can prevent overall language delays that affect school readiness and academic achievement [13].

Myth 2: The Process of Acquiring a Second Language (L2) is the Same as for a First Language (L1) in Early Childhood

Although there are some similarities, there are several differences among the processes of developing first and second languages. A child's goal for learning a first language (L1) is inherently different from the goal for learning a second language (L2). When acquiring a first language, a child is learning how to use language as a means to communicate with others. When learning a second language, a child is learning to communicate in a specific language in a specific context [14]. The process of understanding the function and use of language must be established in order to succeed at learning a particular language.

First, language acquisition is a universal developmental task of early childhood, but acquiring a second language is not. For this reason, first language development is relatively unproblematic for typically developing children, and individual characteristics play a small role. However, when learning a second language, individual characteristics play

a much larger role [14]. One characteristic that plays an important role in second language acquisition is aptitude, as people vary greatly in their abilities to learn a second language. Additionally, social characteristics, such as sociability, confidence and shyness, and the degree of willingness to take risks in social situations play important roles [14]. Furthermore, motivation and an individual's favorable attitude towards the dominant language make a difference in the process of acquiring that language [1].

Myth 3: Acquiring a Second Language (L2) is Easy in Early Childhood

Acquiring a second language (L2) is a difficult task for both children and adults. Although early childhood is a prime time for a child to learn a language, the process of acquiring a second language is demanding and difficult [14]. Early childhood is a critical or sensitive period for the development of a first language, yet a second language can be undertaken at any age (Tabors). As with other forms of challenges, cognitive capacity and cognitive demand play an important role in this process, and in general, the older the child when facing a cognitive challenge, like learning to play chess, the easier it is for the child to learn this (Tabors). Thus, the idea that early childhood is a magical period for acquiring a second language is a myth, and the reality is that this process places a great demand on a child. The only component of second language acquisition with a critical period in early childhood is the development of a native accent [14].

Myth 4: Multilingual Children Lag Behind Peers in Academic and Language Skills

Research indicates that when children are reared in high quality multilingual environments, they experience cognitive, social, and economic benefits. For example, Leikin (2013) [2] found that multilingual young children displayed higher levels of creativity and higher levels of creative mathematical problem solving than monolingual children. Similarly, researchers have consistently found that young multilingual children exhibit better executive functions, such as attention and memory, than monolinguals (e.g., [15]; [16]). Because they are accustomed to switching between languages, multilingual children and adults tend to be faster at switching between sets of rules and symbols. These skills give multilingual children advantages in self-control, problem-solving and decision making [4]. Similarly, fluent bilingualism is associated with higher academic achievement in youth [1] and better cognitive skills in old age [3]. Brain research demonstrates that multilingual children have greater brain tissue density in areas of the brain related to memory, language, and attention with even greater density levels for children exposed to a second language before the age of five [1]. Stocco, Yamaki, Natalenko, and Prat (2014) [17] explain that multilingualism is associated with more flexibility in transferring information to the part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex, which plays a key role in executive functions. They propose that multilingualism "trains the brain" to improve its performance under conditions of competitive information selection.

Myth 5: Adults can't learn languages as well as children.

Reality: While children may appear to learn languages effortlessly, adults possess cognitive advantages such as developed learning strategies and metalinguistic awareness. Research by Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003) [18] suggests that adults can compensate for the lack of a "critical period" for language learning through conscious effort and effective learning techniques.

However, the reality of language learning is more nuanced. While it's true that children have certain advantages, such as greater neural plasticity and the ability to learn through play and social interaction without the pressure of explicit instruction, adults bring their own significant strengths to the table.

Adults have fully developed cognitive abilities that can greatly aid in language learning. One major advantage is metalinguistic awareness—the ability to think about and analyze language as an abstract system. This skill allows adults to understand the rules and structures of a new language more explicitly, making it easier to grasp complex grammatical concepts and vocabulary.

Additionally, adults can employ sophisticated learning strategies that children typically do not use. These strategies include deliberate practice, mnemonic devices, and the use of context to infer meaning. Adults can set specific learning goals, use their knowledge of their first language to make connections, and apply disciplined study habits that younger learners might not have.

Research supports the notion that adults can be effective language learners despite the end of the critical period. A study by Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003) [18] challenges the idea that there is a sharp decline in language learning ability after puberty. Instead, they suggest that adults can compensate for the loss of neural plasticity with cognitive strategies and conscious effort. The research indicates that while the path to language proficiency may be different for adults, it is by no means less achievable.

Moreover, adults often have a clearer understanding of why they want to learn a new language, which can drive motivation and persistence. This intrinsic motivation can lead to more consistent practice and engagement with the language, both of which are crucial for achieving fluency.

In practice, many adults successfully learn new languages to a high level of proficiency. For example, immigrants often learn the language of their new country out of necessity and achieve functional, if not fluent, command.

Professionals and academics frequently acquire new languages for career advancement or research purposes. These real-world examples demonstrate that age is not an insurmountable barrier to language learning.

Myth 6: Immersion is necessary for fluency.

Reality: While immersion can be beneficial, it is not a prerequisite for language fluency. Studies by Blake (2008) [19] and Lado (1957) [20] demonstrate that adults can achieve fluency through various methods, including classroom instruction, self-study, and online resources, without being immersed in the target language environment.

Myth 7: Grammar is paramount in language learning.

Reality: While grammar is essential, a balanced approach that integrates grammar instruction with meaningful communication, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural understanding is more effective. Research by Ellis (2002) [21] and Larsen-Freeman (2003) [22] emphasizes the importance of communicative competence in language acquisition.

Myth 8: Language learning ability is fixed in adults.

Reality: Language learning ability is malleable and can be improved through motivation, self-regulation, and language learning strategies. Studies by Dörnyei (2005) [23] and Oxford (2016) [24] highlight the role of these factors in adult language acquisition, suggesting that adults can enhance their language learning skills with conscious effort.

The myth that language learning ability is fixed in adults implies that adults have a set, unchangeable capacity for learning new languages, and that this ability cannot be improved. In reality, language learning ability is highly malleable and can be significantly enhanced through motivation, self-regulation, and effective language learning strategies.

Motivation

Motivation is a critical factor in language learning. Adults who are highly motivated to learn a language often make more progress and achieve higher levels of proficiency. This motivation can stem from various sources, such as personal interest, professional needs, or social connections. When adults are motivated, they are more likely to engage in consistent practice, seek out additional learning resources, and persist through challenges.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage one's own learning process. This includes setting goals, monitoring progress, and adjusting strategies as needed. Adults who actively regulate their learning can identify their strengths and weaknesses, allocate time effectively, and stay focused on their language learning goals. Self-regulation helps learners to maintain discipline and consistency, which are essential for language acquisition.

Language Learning Strategies

Effective language learning strategies can significantly enhance an adult's ability to learn a new language. These strategies include:

- **Cognitive Strategies**: Techniques like summarizing, deducing rules, and using mnemonic devices to remember vocabulary and grammar.
- **Metacognitive Strategies**: Planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's own learning process.
- **Social Strategies**: Engaging in conversation practice, seeking feedback, and participating in language exchange programs.

Studies by Dörnyei (2005) [23] and Oxford (2016) [24] emphasize the importance of these factors in adult language learning. Dörnyei's research [23] highlights how motivation and self-regulation contribute to language learning success, while Oxford focuses on the role of specific learning strategies in enhancing language acquisition. Both studies suggest that adults can significantly improve their language learning abilities with conscious effort and the right approaches.

Myth 9: Learning a language as an adult takes too long.

Reality: The time it takes to learn a language as an adult varies depending on individual factors such as motivation, prior language learning experience, and exposure to the target language. Studies by DeKeyser (2000) [25] and Krashen (1982) [26] suggest that adults can achieve high levels of proficiency with consistent effort and effective learning strategies.

Motivation

Motivation plays a crucial role in how quickly an adult can learn a new language. Highly motivated individuals are more likely to dedicate time and effort to their studies, practice regularly, and seek out opportunities to use the language. This can significantly accelerate the learning process.

Prior Language Learning Experience

Adults who have previously learned other languages often find it easier to learn additional ones. Their prior experience provides them with a better understanding of language structures, learning strategies, and the ability to make

connections between languages. This prior knowledge can shorten the time needed to achieve proficiency in a new language.

Exposure to the Target Language

The amount and quality of exposure to the target language also impact the speed of language acquisition. Regular interaction with native speakers, immersion in environments where the language is spoken, and frequent practice can all contribute to faster learning.

Consistent Effort and Effective Learning Strategies

Research by DeKeyser (2000) [25] and Krashen (1982) [26] supports the idea that adults can achieve high levels of proficiency with consistent effort and the use of effective learning strategies. DeKeyser's study [25] highlights the importance of deliberate practice and the role of cognitive skills in language learning. Krashen's input hypothesis [26] emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input, suggesting that exposure to language that is slightly above the current proficiency level can facilitate learning.

Effective learning strategies, such as setting clear goals, using a variety of resources, practicing speaking and listening regularly, and seeking feedback, can greatly enhance the efficiency of the learning process. By adopting these strategies, adults can make steady progress and achieve fluency more quickly than the myth suggests.

Conclusions

This study has shed light on various myths surrounding language acquisition in both childhood and adulthood, revealing important insights based on empirical evidence and research findings. By debunking misconceptions such as the necessity for non-native English-speaking parents to speak English at home, the "magical" period for second language acquisition in early childhood, and the assumption that multilingual children lag behind their peers, we have presented a more nuanced understanding of language development.

Furthermore, the examination of differences in the acquisition of second languages compared to first languages, the debunking of the myth that adults are less effective language learners, and the challenge to the fixed belief in language learning ability in adults have provided valuable perspectives on language acquisition at different stages of life. The emphasis on the significance of motivation, self-regulation, and effective learning strategies in adult language acquisition offers practical insights for individuals seeking to improve their language skills.

Overall, this study has underscored the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and the positive impact it can have on brain development. By fostering a deeper understanding of language acquisition and challenging prevailing myths, we hope to inspire individuals to approach language learning with confidence, regardless of age, and to embrace the opportunities and advantages that multilingualism can offer in various aspects of life.

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